

LITERACY TIP:

WORDS, WORDS, WORDS –

or What the Research Suggests About Vocabulary Study

Many adults remember being given lists of words to learn in order to ace the SATs – obscure words, words never seen before or since, words that were “sure to come up in the analogy section” – and somehow, we struggled to memorize the words and their meanings. So what if we forgot most of them in the weeks and months that followed?

Researchers who study how people learn new words have suggested that efforts to absorb piles of unrelated vocabulary words aren’t worthwhile for many if not most learners. The problem is how to recall a word learned out of context. If it’s not “filed” somewhere accessible, it could be lost forever.

Reading challenging, complex text requires us to use three different skills:

First, you need the ability to *decode* the unfamiliar word. You use your knowledge of phonics to sound it out, maybe find similarities to other words you know. Does it sound like a word you’ve heard?

Next, you attempt to *comprehend* the word based on the context, the words around it. You draw on what you know of roots, prefixes, and suffixes, and you ask yourself if the meaning you’re guessing makes sense in the sentence. But—if you’re asked to define a word all by itself as part of a standardized test, it’s easy to get stuck.

Why? Because the brain organizes everything you learn into chunks of knowledge, and unless you learned the word with some helpful associations, you’ve got nowhere to keep it until you need it. Instead, it’s sitting in some dark corner of your brain, dependent on a bit of luck that you’ll be able to *retrieve* it.

This principle is why educators are encouraged to teach something new by first “accessing prior knowledge” – in other words, attaching the *new* stuff to some *old* stuff. By asking children what they already know about dinosaurs or tornados, you prepare them to acquire new knowledge, including new vocabulary linked to the subject matter.

This doesn’t mean that you can only learn new words when they’re specific to unique topics –

but it helps! So, if you're investigating hurricanes on the Internet, it's a good time to learn about more than just the Saffir-Simpson scale (Category 1 through 5). You can also bring up descriptive adjectives that are used to describe the effects of a hurricane: damage, destructive, debris, deadly, dangerous, as well as the specific events they're used to describe: storm surge, torrential rains, or flash flood, for example. Looking at photographs of a hurricane's aftermath – making a visual as well as a language connection – will help solidify your student's understanding of this batch of new vocabulary.

Another way to make new words memorable is to talk with your tutee about how and why an author uses them. If you're reading a novel together, look for the words the author chooses to describe a particular character. In *Animal Farm*, for instance, you can discuss how the character of Napoleon, the pig, acts only for his own good – and introduce words such as “opportunist,” “intimidate,” and “corrupt.” Since he is modeled on a dictator, you can introduce the concept of tyranny, and you can also help your student make the connection to bullying. Your tutee is more likely to remember those words because you used them to make a clear connection to a specific character, and so they will be forever linked together, useful to that student when and if the time comes to write a paper comparing this literary aggressor to a real-life one.

Sometimes you'll encounter a word that your tutee is rarely likely to encounter again, such as *spindle* in *Sleeping Beauty* (what she pricks her finger on) or *gunny sack* in a pioneer saga. It's not worth spending much time on these kinds of words – it's better simply to provide the meaning as you read together. You'll accomplish more by talking about the words that matter: *pyramid*, *hieroglyph*, *ancient*, when you're studying Egypt; *membrane*, *nucleus*, *chlorophyll*, when you're learning about plants.

You'll also do your student a favor to pre-teach important new words before tackling a reading passage. Even if you're reading aloud to your tutee, it makes sense to prepare for something new by providing a link to something already known.

And if you do find that your tutee has been assigned lists of random words, turn learning them into a game of connections. After they are defined and understood, work together to create a story (or even just a paragraph) that puts them all to use. Using the new words in a context you provide also helps to create a “brain file.”

Vary your chosen texts so that you include both fiction and nonfiction (not only books—try short stories and news articles). By sharing strategies for figuring out meanings, and by regularly pointing out connections to words and concepts already known (synonyms, shared roots), you can help your student's vocabulary grow by leaps and bounds!